

[Jim Higgins]

W15013

1 Conn. 1938-9 Higgins

"Jim" Higgins, 72, Grand Street, Thomaston, former knifemaker:

"Charley Klocker over at the mill was tellin' me about you. Said you were around lookin' for stories about the old knifemarkers. You seen Charley didn't you? Eh-yah, that's what he said. Well, they all drifted, the old timers did, all over hell. Charley and me ended up in the mill. We're the only ones over there.

"Well, they were quite a crew. I learned what I knew about the trade from the old johnny bulls, and I worked at it for more than thirty years, first over in Hotchkissville and then down t' the brick shop on the Waterbury road. I helped build that one—the one Joe Warner started. He used to be bookkeeper for the old American Knife Company down in the village before Doc Ferguson got tired of the strikes and closed it down.

"You been to see some of the old fellers down at the Bridge? Bill Dunbar and Jim Truelove and Charley Kerr? You have, hey. Well, you ought to go see Charley again, when he's got more time to talk. Take a half pint down with you and he'll talk all day.

"Any of 'em ever tell you about Jess Walker? I don't know's he ever worked around here at that, but he did work in Hotchkissville while I was there. He was a comical old cuss, one of the real old fellers from Sheffield, and they used to tell stories about him in a lot of the knife shops around this section 2 till you couldn't tell which was true and which was made up. Seems to me he worked up in Northfield for a while, too, but I ain't sure of it.

"But there's one I know was true, because it happened right over in Hotchkissville while I was there. Say, what's this for anyway, a newspaper or a magazine? If it is, leave me out

Library of Congress

of it, don't mention my name. Old Walker's dead and the family's moved away, but there's prob'ly some of his kids or grandchildren scattered around the country somewheres.

“His besettin' sin, like a lot of the other johnnies, was the booze. He wasn't a periodical drinker, like some of them, though, he was boiled most of the time. But he could hold it better than average, and he used to come to work, sometimes, and put in a good day, too, with enough liquor inside him to put the average man out cold. And if he felt like havin' more he'd drop everything and go out to a saloon and get it.

“Make it all the worse, his wife was termperance, and religious as all hell. He had four-five kids, the oldest one at the time I knew him was a girl about twenty-two or three year old and she was just like the old lady. I can see the two of them yet, tall ind skinny, sour-lookin' dames. Jess was short and stocky, with a big mustache and a red face, like a lot of rummies have, but there wasn't anything mean or nasty about him. The drunker he got, the better natured he was. But of course the women were dead set against booze and they were always houndin' him about it.

3

“Well, he was superstitious as hell, you know, and I guess that give 'em the idea for the trick they played on him. Some said they went to the minister and he helped 'em hatch it up, but I don't know about that. Anyway Jess came home late one night, roarin' drunk, and just about able to navigate, and he started up the stairs, puttin' one foot ahead of the other very carefully, I s'pose, and he looks up and there was this big white figure at the head of the stairs kind of wavin' at him. Well, Jess was about half way up, and he let out a squawk and tried to turn around, but he couldn't make it, and down he went head over tea kettle to the bottom. The ghost—it was his daughter. You see, dressed up in a bedsheet—she come down the stairs in a hurry and the old lady with her, and they picked up poor old Jess, but he was hurt pretty bad. So the girl ran out and got the doctor and she was bawlin' and carryin' on by the time she got there, and she told him the whole story, because she thought she'd killed the old man, see? But it turned out he had three-four broken ribs and a

Library of Congress

cut over one eye, and in a couple of weeks he was a good as ever. First thing he did when he was able to get out was to go on a good bat. He never held it against the women, he used to tell the story himself and laugh as hard as anyone about it. But they never tried any more stunts like that, far's I know.

“He was a great old Jess. I wish I could remember some more of the stories about him. You been up to Northfield, have you? You oughta pick up plenty of stuff up there. You 4 see George Wright, did you? His father was one of the old Sheffields. He married a Northfield girl, and she had a hell of a time tryin' to get used to his ways. There wasn't anything polished or polite about the old johnnies, you know, they were a rough, tough bunch on the whole. George's mother kept boarders after she got married, she took in three or four lads from the old country who came to Northfield to work in the shop. George used to tell about the way his father introduced them to his mother. “C'mere, you chaps and meet my old lass.” She used to get madder'n hell at him. She had a great time tryin' to teach the johnnies table manners, too.

“They had a strike up in Northfield about forty years ago. Maybe it was more than forty—yes I guess it was—Charley Klocker told you about that? Yes, he was workin' up there at the time—Well, there ain't much more that I can give you. Why don't you go back and see Charley Kerr. Tell him I sent you.